

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Four

John Deming's Hands

THERE WAS NOTHING ODD about John Deming until he took his hands out of his pockets. Then you saw, at the end of his arms, monstrous hands that flapped, big-knuckled, against his sides. Even his feet, pointing ahead seemed of moderate size until you saw his hands.

By the time he was eight years old, John didn't favor the Freeport, Michigan, folks often with a look at his hands. He kept them stuffed in his pockets. But a fellow can't hide his feet from the people on his street.

"Clump foot," they called. "Bear tracks."

"Looky, looky, here comes a guy in a pair of snowshoes."

"Naw, it's not a guy in a pair of snowshoes. It's just old Paddle-foot, John Deming."

John heard the miserable chorus every day.

It was the girls who bothered him most. The pretty little girls with their blond curls and their fluffy dresses, some the color of candy.

Like Janey. From a distance, John followed Janey home after school every day. Janey was a cute one; she flipped her curls and skipped along the sidewalk with much giggling. But one day, teetering on top of a wall, she slipped.

Down she rolled in the gravel.

John forgot his hands; he might have been a knight in armor.

"Janey," he shouted.

"Lookit, fellows, Janey fell off the wall. Get out of the way."

John clumped up over the wall. At the bottom Janey lay in a heap and sobbed. Her hair straggled into a mud puddle.

"Janey, Janey, are you hurt?"

"Yes, oh, yes," she whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut. John reached out. "Look, your pretty hair, it's all wet. I'll take it and-"

Janey peeked up at him. "No, no," she screamed. "Go away, John Deming, don't touch me. I didn't know it was you."

John backed off. "I wasn't going to do nothing."

"John Deming, I'm not hurt a bit. Now, go away. I can't stand to have you touch my hair, - those awful big hands of yours."

The hands kept growing, and his feet. John grew too, but there was no catching up to them. When he was twenty-five, he was a short man, with out-sized extremities.

Everybody in town knew Johnny. "Honest, reliable, trustworthy, John Deming!"

One day, he surprised the good townspeople who called him honest, but never urged their daughters or their sisters to encourage his attentions, by borrowing a hundred dollars on his "integrity" and leaving town.

"Detroit's a good place for a guy like me to get lost in," he said.

A job in Detroit, a few friends, and John even joined the Masons. But he was still John Deming with the extra big hands and feet. And he was lonesome.

Maybe a church - love of GOD, Christian people - maybe he'd find friends there.

After services at church, people spoke. Two elderly women, a small boy, a deacon nodded and smiled and said, "Good sermon." They were the only ones. John kept going back. One Sunday, he heard two church women.

"There's that poor Deming fellow," one said.

"Where? Mercy, did you ever see such hands?" the other asked.

"I know. But it's our duty to make him feel at home. Go on, you invite him."

A rashlike blush colored John's face when the ladies invited him to young people's meeting. He

didn't go; nor did he go back to church.

After that, his thought about having regular-sized feet and hands small enough to pick up a pair of gloves at a bargain counter got jumbled with his dreams about Shirley. Shirley, from the inspection department at his plant. Dark-haired, blue-eyed Shirley.

John was sure Shirley hadn't seen his hands. When she passed him on the way to the time clock, he hid them; when she sat across from him in the cafeteria, he forgot to eat, kept his hands in his lap, played like he wasn't hungry. By five on those days, his hands were shaky. Work with too little proper food.

In his dreams, Shirley always said Yes to a date. Maybe some day, he'd have the courage -. John began to whistle going home.

Until the day Shirley sat across from him at lunch with another girl.

"Hey, look," he heard her whisper. "There's Deming again."

"Just sitting there with his hands in his lap," she said. "Wouldn't be a bad-looking punk if he didn't have such hands."

"Boy, he's sure got them, though. Gives me the shudders."

After that, Johnny didn't say much to anybody. On his relief periods, he hung around the big machinery. Not saying much, just staring. In his mind, he had an idea, for he'd heard of men who had artificial hands. If they lost their own in a mine explosion or a big machine they had some made.

He was surprised when the boss called him into his office. "Deming, you haven't been doing so well lately," he said.

But John was ready with his answer. He rested one big hand on the boss' desk so that it shoved the dictionary to the corner. His lower lip twitched; he moistened it with his tongue. His eyes fogged slightly. "You couldn't get me transferred to any other part of the plant? Maybe near some of the machinery."

His boss pushed his chair back from the desk. John knew he'd said the wrong thing, been too eager. The boss loosened his collar. "I'm sorry, Deming." He cleared his throat. "We have no such openings. I'm afraid, you'd better find another plant."

He would have gone home, quit Detroit altogether that night, if the telegram from Freeport hadn't been shoved under his door when he came up the last flight of stairs to his room. His mother had died that day.

After the funeral, John came back to Detroit. He lost another job, went back to Freeport for good.

The woman who answered the door of his father's house was a stranger to him.

"Whatcha want?" she asked.

"Why - I - Is Dad at home?" John asked. The woman's eyes were on his hands; sweat started behind his ear.

"Oh, you must be John." He nodded.

"Well, come on in." The woman jerked the door open wider. "Well, well. In case you're not wise to it yet, I'm your father's wife. Come on in." She was looking at his hands.

She always seemed to look. His hands putting sugar on the cereal at breakfast, his hands holding the newspaper in the living room at night. After a while, John thought she got used to them. And more and more he liked living at home, with home people, hearing voices in the living room as he lay in bed going to sleep.

One night, as he came home from work, his stepmother stopped him in the downstairs hall. "Wait a minute. I wanta have a word with you."

"Sure," he said. "Shoot. What's on your mind?"

"I wanta tell you I've done for you and the rest of your father's brood as long as I'm gonna, without some action. You and four others besides him and me are too much. Here's ten dollars I give you for my conscience. Take it and get out. Live somewhere else. You seem to be the extra one I can't take. Don't let me catch you tellin' your father, either. You'll be sorry, if you do."

All the time she talked her eyes were watching his hands.

"I never did tell Dad and he lived to be eighty-eight years old. If I keep moving, maybe folks won't notice, I figured. I searched for odd jobs all over the country until I came to Rochester, New York. In Rochester, I paused a while like a big ugly bird looking for a place to settle. It was there I found the matrimonial magazine. And Ethel."

He didn't want to send a picture in his letter to Ethel.

When he did, it was the one with his hands in back of him, his feet hidden.

It wasn't long after he mailed the picture that Johnny got a letter saying to come to Sharon, Pa., for a visit.

When he crossed her front porch, he was scared.

The screen door opened and slammed. "Hello there. You must be John," an efficient-looking woman said.

"You must be Ethel."

Ethel motioned to the porch swing. "Let's sit down and get acquainted."

"Good trip?" she asked. "Good trip," he answered.

Sitting on the swing, John tried to cram his hands into his pockets.

"Something wrong?" Ethel asked. "I mean, looking for something in your coat pocket?"

"No," John said. "I guess I was trying to get my hands in my pockets."

"That's funny when a man can't get his hands in his pockets without all that work."

"Well - I - you see-"

"Pockets in that coat must be extra small. I could let them out a little, if you like."

Here was a woman who didn't object to his hands, who kept a neat house, who liked him. When they married, they lived in Sharon and John found a steady job, because Ethel liked a good provider. She was a practical woman. "No presents for me," she said. "Just you put your money in the bank."

Ethel wanted a man to be a good provider even when jobs were scarce. When Johnny was laid off at the plant in '32 with seventy other men, he worried about telling Ethel.

But she met him at the door. "Come on," she said.

"I heard about it. We're going to Mother's. It's the only practical thing."

John felt sick. "I can't, Ethel," he told her. "I feel at home with you. You're the only-"

"It's the practical thing," Ethel repeated.

"Just wait," John said. "Give me a day or two to get another job."

"You heard me, John. Mother's expecting us. I never liked a whining man. Give me a hand with that trunk."

John tried to find a job. But he couldn't. "Got a job today, John?"

"No, Ethel, but I got some irons in the fire."

"One more month, John. Still out of work and I'll divorce you."

At the end of the month, job-hunting had blistered John's big feet. Still no job. Ethel threatened to file suit for divorce the next day.

"Before you do, Honey, let's walk out to the city limits, like we used to do," John said.

"Won't do you a bit of good. If a man can't earn me a living, I'm through. Suppose I'll go with you, though."

All the way out, John put first one hand, then the other, into his pockets. He thought he'd stopped that uneasy habit months ago.

At the end of the city limits, Ethel stopped. "You've had your walk," she said. "Now I'm going back to Mother's."

John watched her go. Then he limped on a hundred yards and sat down in a little gully. A truck came along. John shuffled over to the road and held up his thumb for a ride.

The truck traveled a long way. "Still in Indiana?" John queried. Then he told the driver he was broke, that his feet pained him, that he was down "on his luck."

"Got a suggestion," the truck driver said. "Go to the Pacific Garden Mission when you get to Chicago. South State Street, 650. They put you up and feed you free for nothing. Aw, I think you got to go to church or somethin', but you get a clean bed, good grub. Worth a try."

In Chicago, John moved his big feet down South State Street to 650.

"Got to sit down," he told the man at the door.

"You're not drunk," the man said.

"I'm not drunk," John answered promptly.

"You're sick," the man said.

"Yes, sick," John answered. "Sick - in my feet, my head, my heart. I reckon it's broken. Give me something to eat. Let me sit here."

He got his food and a shower. Then, like the truck driver told him, in the evening he had to go to a meeting in the Mission Chapel.

The man speaking had a quiet voice.

"We all have to be loved," he said. "We've got to feel that somebody wants us. Why, this whole business of being alive is to belong to somebody. To love, to be loved. Maybe you think nobody in the world loves you. Look at the mission wall."

A man couldn't sit there and not look at the wall. Not after a free meal. On the wall, John read, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Maybe GOD loved the world. But did He love a fellow with hands and feet too big for the rest of him?

"Try Him and see how much He loves you, right now. Try Him. Go on. In your words. Call on Him," the quiet-voiced man told John later.

He was sick and lonesome. He told GOD that. "I'm just about done in. Can You - will You - do something to help me? In JESUS' name."

Although Ethel never came back, today, if you walk into the Seaman's Center in a town in Texas, you won't notice anything odd about worker John Deming until he takes his hands out of his pockets. But the sight of his large hands won't bother you because you'll see at once that John's still too happy in his over twenty years of Christian service to let them bother him!

~ end of chapter 4 ~
